

# Big anniversary (from page 1)

Quist and his newly formed band made their debut performance as the first concert in the Folkshop's first series. "It was the talk of the town for two weeks," says Cantlon.

The next two shows lost enough money that by the end of the inaugural season, "we were \$35 ahead. I thought it was a great accomplishment not to be in the hole."

Organizers decided to recruit sponsors – a plan that helped ensure the series' long life. "The reason we've lasted 25 years is because we've had sponsors and believe we need to give them more than a passing name in the program," says Cantlon. "We need to make it clear to the community what they are doing for us, and for the audience."

Big Productions (as it's been known for several years) does that in a number of ways: banners for each sponsor are draped across the front of the stage; and individual concert sponsors are mentioned at the end of radio ads, on all posters and programs, and are thanked by Cantlon when he introduces the performers.

Backers also receive tickets to the show.

The ultimate goal is to line up enough sponsors, as well as pursuing grants from WESTAF and the Montana Performing Arts Consortium, to pay for the series "before we sell the first ticket." That way, ticket revenues go to the Youth Home.

The series includes seven concerts from October through April, with an occasional "off-series" event. Cantlon says he – along with an advisory group that helps select performers – strives to balance genres and give audiences a mix of sure-fire draws and more challenging fare.

Typically, shows attract a crowd of 125-175, and can draw as many as 350. "We have a rabid audience for classical music – 75 people show up, but that's about it," says Margie. "The same is true of jazz. We can't afford to take a night like that very often ...

But we also like little challenges."

She points to a Brazilian guitarist – "one of the finest musicians we've ever had." While she predicts at least eight area schools will sign up for assemblies, only 75-100 people are apt to attend the show.

"Our mission is to bring as much as we can to the schools," she adds. "We also want to stretch our audiences and attract young folks."

Big Productions usually offers up to a dozen school shows per year. When they started, it was just two or three.

The benefits of working with schools are myriad. First, by admitting kids 18 and under

an amazing experience ... and we like the artists to have just as much fun as the audience."

The couple says that emailing concert reminders has done more to increase their audience than any other marketing technique. They've developed a large email list, and send recipients a series announcement, followed by an email 10 days before a concert, and another reminder the day before a show. "We've learned that people our age occasionally forget things," says Cantlon.

In the first two years of developing this strategy, ticket sales doubled. "We try to give them the feeling they're getting the inside scoop – it's more like a conversation, with additional information about the artist," says Chas.

Two couples with large, comfortable homes overlooking Flathead Lake, provide lodging for artists. "Both of them know how to give the artists space and make them feel welcome," says Cantlon.

Occasionally, Big Productions has used that as leverage

for a performer who costs more than they can afford. "One artist was asking \$5,000-\$6,000. We had a spot left on our schedule, but could only pay \$1,500," recalls Chas. "We said, 'we'll take care of you like kings and queens,' and by the end of the summer, they said 'yes.'"

After more than 38 years with Lake County Youth Home, Cantlon is retiring this year, although he and Margie have offered to continue wrangling the concert series, "in return for gas money" to and from their retirement home in Idaho.

Cantlon still enjoys introducing Mission Valley audiences to new musicians – and occasionally old friends. "They don't always know they're coming to the Garden of Eden until they get here," he says. But that's fine with him: "I like the element of surprise."

## Deadline is Oct. 31 for MPAC Showcase

The Montana Performing Arts Consortium hosts its annual Performing Artists' Showcase and Block Booking Conference, Jan. 25-27 at the Mansfield Performing Arts Center in Great Falls. The showcase is Saturday, and offers an opportunity for artists to reach presenters who do not attend large national booking conferences.

Approximately 20 presenting organizations in Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho are expected to attend the MPAC conference, which several artists have described as the "most humane and fun

booking conference in the country."

Applications must be postmarked Oct. 31 and may be downloaded from the website, [www.mtperformingarts.org](http://www.mtperformingarts.org). Electronic application is not yet available.

The number of showcase time slots is limited to 17, and artists must submit: three identical sets of publicity material; one CD or DVD sample; and one black and white or color photograph or digital image on CD; a completed application form and registration fee. Artists will be notified of jury results by Nov. 21.

For more details, contact [info@mtperformingarts.org](mailto:info@mtperformingarts.org) or 406-585- 9551.

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– Chas Cantlon**

for free (11 and under need to be accompanied by a ticketed adult), Big Productions is allowed to use school auditoriums in Polson and Ronan at no charge. "It's a win-win situation, and we're hoping they bring parents, and become our audience."

Over the years, Margie says, kids have also learned how to become respectful audiences. By attending school assemblies, middle school students ("orangutans," Chas calls them) "learn how to listen, how to appreciate and how to appropriately respond."

She's also noticed that kids become more willing "to try new things, to open up their minds."

The same might be true of Mission Valley audiences, who have developed a reputation for being appreciative and responsive. "They know how to give performers energy," says Cantlon. "Artists are always telling us that's

audience," he says. The performers he sees at MPAC "are all more or less great artists or musicians." But if they can't relate to an audience, Cantlon won't try to sign them for his series.

Of course, price and musicianship matter too: "We want the highest quality we can afford."

"They must be excellent musicians or performers within their medium," he adds. And polished enough "that I don't have to worry about it if they screw up."

He offers two examples of acts that he booked after a showcase:

The Goddard Sisters are a family band from the West Coast that performed in Ronan last year. "They let their personalities and character come through. The audience felt like they were sitting on the front porch with them."

And this season's opening act, James Lee Stanley and John Batdorf, is a duo that offers acoustic versions of rock classics. "These guys are the epitome of how to do a showcase. Their musicianship was impeccable, their songs talked to us, and we didn't know we'd get quality stand-up too."

For more on the MPAC conference, visit [www.mtperformingarts.org](http://www.mtperformingarts.org).

# Tips for performing artists: Connect with your audience

By Kristi Niemeyer

Chas Cantlon, who has been promoting concerts in the Mission Valley for 25 years, says the first time he attended a Montana Performing Arts Consortium (MPAC) booking conference, "I thought it was a rip-off."

He quickly discovered, however, that MPAC "is a huge, huge resource that allows me to see how artists interact with the audience."

He notes, too, "artists are crappy at getting an audience in front of them, and audiences don't know how to get artists in front of them." MPAC brings the two together.

The annual event, held in a different Montana town each year, gives artists a chance to strut their stuff during the 12-minute showcase presentations and offers series' presenters an opportunity to mingle with artists, sample their wares and "block book" with other promoters for savings.

The next conference is Jan. 25-27 in Great Falls, with the showcase on Saturday, Jan. 26.

Cantlon offers these suggestions to artists who are hoping to make the most out of their 12 minutes of fame:

- First and foremost: "Be sure and look at, and relate to, the audience. Don't try to impress us with how great you are; just try to relate to people as genuine."
- "Don't complain about the 12 minutes, and don't try to show everything. Offer a microcosm."
- "Start with something upbeat."
- "Learn to act like you're relaxed, whether you're relaxed or not."

What catches his eye on stage, and makes him want to book the artist?

"The number-one thing is relating to the



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## Best practices for volunteer orientation

Shawn Kendrick offered the following tips on training volunteers in a February 2012 issue of GuideStar, an information service for nonprofits:

Orientation is a volunteer management practice that sets the foundation for a successful relationship. Start with one-on-one time with your volunteer so you can have a reciprocating relationship and place them in the appropriate assignments.

- Show the volunteer that there are expectations and you need to be taken seriously.

- Have new volunteers experience your organization's services as a client would.

- Pair the volunteer with an experienced volunteer or staff member for the greatest benefit to your company. For more, visit [www2.guidestar.org](http://www2.guidestar.org).